

UNCLASSIFIED

WHA Press Guidance
January 25, 2002

A17
RELEASED IN FULL

VENEZUELA: CHAVEZ BLASTS PAPAL NUNCIO

Question: Do you have any comments regarding Venezuelan President Chávez's response to the Papal Nuncio's statements during a meeting with the Diplomatic Corps?

A: THE PAPAL NUNCIO, AS DEAN OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS IN CARACAS, SPOKE ON BEHALF OF ALL THE GATHERED CHIEFS OF MISSION DURING A MEETING WITH PRESIDENT CHAVEZ. WE SHARE THE CONCERNS HE EXPRESSED REGARDING THE RADICALIZATION AND POLARIZATION OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN VENEZUELA. ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES (OAS) MEMBER COUNTRIES, INCLUDING VENEZUELA, COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO RESPECT THE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT WHEN THEY SIGNED THE INTER-AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC CHARTER IN LIMA ON SEPTEMBER 11. EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN ABOUT RADICALIZATION AND POLARIZATION THAT THREATEN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE CANNOT BE DISMISSED AS INTERFERENCE IN THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF A SOVEREIGN COUNTRY.

WE THOUGHT THE PAPAL NUNCIO'S REMARKS WERE BALANCED AND THOUGHTFUL. WE WERE SURPRISED BY PRESIDENT CHAVEZ'S REACTION TO THEM, ESPECIALLY HIS CHARACTERIZATION OF CHURCH HIERARCHY AS A "TUMOR." THIS KIND OF CHARACTERIZATION DOES NOT HELP PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE.

UNCLASSIFIED

[Background: Venezuelan President Chávez meeting with the Venezuelan Diplomatic Corps yesterday. Papal Nuncio André Dupuy, the Dean of the Venezuelan Diplomatic Corps, opened this traditional annual meeting with an address on behalf of the diplomatic corps. The Papal Nuncio stated that it would be "a shame" for Chávez's "radicalization" and excessive polarization to jeopardize the "human objectives of the Bolivarian revolution" such as justice, peace and the alleviation of poverty. Additionally, the Papal Nuncio said it was their duty of diplomats to comment on the situation in the countries in which they served stating, "Diplomats are at the service of the people and of their dignity and protection." Chávez lashed out at the Papal Nuncio and the diplomatic corps rejecting interference in Venezuelan affairs, and calling the Catholic Church a "tumor" that afflicts Venezuela.]